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SUBJECT: RIGHT WING VLAAMS BELANG SAYS SUPPORT FOR FLEMISH
INDEPENDENCE GROWS BUT NO REVOLUTION IMMINENT

REF: BRUSSELS 3021

¶1. (SBU) With over one hundred days without a government, speculation in the international media rapidly spread about the future of Belgium. Touted to become Prime Minister after the June 10 elections, Flemish Christian Democratic (CD&V) leader Yves Leterme's efforts to form a government broke down, held hostage by the wide gulf between the Flemish and French sides on institutional or state reform and the Francophones' dislike and suspicion of Leterme (reftel).

¶2. (SBU) The international press picked up on the feud, speculating about the "two extremes in Belgium," those hankering for separation versus those who believe Belgium will last forever. Some Flemish nationalists, like the right-wing Vlaams Belang (VB) party, are almost jubilant about the lack of a government. VB leaders have been pictured celebrating the passing of one hundred days without a government, certain the impasse only reinforces their position that Flanders would be better off without Belgium.

¶3. (SBU) According to a VB parliamentarian with whom embassy maintains discreet contact, the idea of Flemish independence has surged in support in Flanders, up from approximately ten percent of the population a couple of years ago to forty to fifty percent now. He called the numbers supporting separation "exceptional, something we have never seen before." He partly attributed the increase to the problems ensuing from the government formation talks, and complained that CD&V leader Leterme was negotiating with a "watered down version" of the institutional (state) reform platform he ran on for the June 2007 federal elections. Our contact did not mince words about what he saw as the true nature of the Flemish desire for institutional reform. He argued that "true state reform" was crucial to give Flanders more regional competencies, which Flanders needed in order to accrue power and combat an overreaching federal government. While the Flemish contention, distrusted by Francophones, that state reform is needed to make Belgium more economically competitive was true, elevating Flanders by limiting the federal role was a primary objective.

¶4. (SBU) The parliamentarian summed up the divide between Flemish and French speakers, particularly on state reform, from VB's perspective: "Francophones are attached to the Belgian state, whereas the Flemish see Flanders as their country." While Flanders was eager to be more independent and powerful, Wallonia feared the loss of government benefits and additional responsibilities that more regional competencies would bring.

¶5. (SBU) Despite the increased Flemish desire for independence, "there's no revolutionary atmosphere in Belgium," he maintained. VB preferred a united Belgium over a separate one garnered from violence or overt factional hostility. But the desire for separation remains strong in Flanders because "we Flemish do not feel at home in Belgium,"

a holdover from historical French elitism and disdain towards the Flemish. He maintained that Belgium's royal family did not want to acknowledge Flanders, and referred to the Queen's lack of Flemish language skills as "an insult." He also did not view the prominent role played by Flemish politicians in the federal Government (i.e., as Prime Minister and Foreign Minister) as particularly favorable. Pointing to PM Verhofstadt's change in stance to favor voting rights for immigrants in the 2006 local elections, effectively a concession to the francophone Socialist party, he claimed "the price to have a Flemish Prime Minister is so high -- they have to make a lot of concessions to French-speakers."

¶6. (SBU) Our contact was optimistic about VB's future growth, although noticeably concerned about the effect political parties such as "Lijst Dedecker" and Flemish nationalist N-VA (New Flemish Alliance) might have on VB's position. While Vlaams Belang managed to better its 2003 score in terms of percentage in the 2007 federal elections, it still lost a seat in the House of Representatives. Coming on top of a disappointing showing in the October 2006 municipal elections, the 2007 results fueled speculation that VB has reached its natural ceiling of around twenty-five percent of the vote. On the other hand, "Lijst Dedecker," a new party centered around Jean-Marie Dedecker, a maverick former member of the Flemish Liberal Open VLD, expelled from the party in 2006, did better than expected and won five seats.

¶7. (SBU) Calling NV-A both an "ally and a traitor," the VB contact said NV-A and Vlaams Belang have the same nationalist goals but thought NV-A had compromised on the forcefulness of its platform in order to be "more palatable" to the general public. "We have the same goals but a different strategy," he opined (perhaps alluding to episodes such as VB leaders

Frank Vanhecke and Filip Dewinter purposely getting arrested at an outlawed anti-Islam rally that VB supported, or cheerfully brandishing a cake to celebrate one hundred days without a government). He thought NV-A, in partnership with CD&V, held strong cards in the government formation talks but would remain politically successful only if institutional reform is part of the package. If Leterme's CD&V forms a new government without major state reform, he felt NV-A could split from CD&V and join "Lijst Dedecker".

¶8. (SBU) Comment: While still a force to be reckoned with on the Belgian political scene, VB leaders are nevertheless concerned about the party's growth potential, with a disappointing showing in the 2006 local elections and the loss of a House seat in 2007. The party strives to remain relevant on its separatist platform. It must be noted, however, that the huge number for independence cited by our VB contact may be less striking than he presents: the result was from a small poll that asked whether respondents would support independence if the francophones refuse to make any concessions during government talks.

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